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Hantaï, Villeglé, and the Dialectics of Painting's Dispersal

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

If the art historian takes as a task the tracing of those structures that are in fact common to what appear to be two rather different if not outright oppositional practices of painting in the immediate aftermath of World War II in France, how can such a task best be approached? First of all, by accepting as a given the profound incommensurability and incompatibility of the works to be compared.

At first glance at least, Simon Hantaï and Jacques de la Villeglé seem to share nothing at all, except that they were born in the moment of the early 1920s: Villeglé in 1926, the year of Surrealism's conflicted relations between art (the opening of the *Galerie Surréaliste*) and politics (Breton's *Légitime défense*); Hantaï in 1922 in a village near Budapest, the city where he would attend the Academy of Art, in a culture whose avant-garde participation had become known for its proximity to a model of techno-scientific and political revolution (e.g. Béla Balázs, Lajos Kassak, László Moholy-Nagy, Georg Lukács), rather than for a psycho-analytically informed mobilization of the forces of the unconscious to subvert the atrophied libidinal apparatus of the Western European bourgeoisie.

Both avant-garde models had, of course, intersected and come together in various instances throughout the 1920s and '30s, and both had defined themselves as projects "to create certain links to constitute a new movement which most of all should reestablish a fusion between the cultural creation of the avant-garde and the revolutionary critique of society."¹

But perhaps we could, in fact, construct a second context, more credible than merely that of generational proximity: that of a temporal moment and a spatial, if not a discursive, site shared by both artists, one which would instantly set them apart from any comparative reading with the avant-gardes of the 1920s. This would be the year 1949, when Hantaï arrived in Paris from Hungary via Italy, and Villeglé arrived in Paris from Brittany (Ellsworth Kelly, born in 1923, had arrived in the same city in October 1948 from the United States). The situation then and

1. Guy Debord, "Introduction to Potlatch" (1954–57), in *Potlatch* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1996), p. 8.



Simon Hantai. ... Dell'Orto. Mariale M.D.2. 1962.

there would hardly have allowed for any radical avant-garde aspirations of either kind, given the recent fate of Paris. The accounts of the larger historical catastrophe grew beyond the city's horizons and beyond its imagination: the experience of the occupation by the German Fascists, the legacies of the collaborationist Vichy regime, and the gradual recognition of the unimaginable extent of the devastation of European bourgeois culture brought about by Fascism and the Second World War. The very model of a "Principle of Hope"²—so integral to any avant-garde formation—must have appeared unthinkable at that time to anyone contemplating not just the ruins of the avant-garde but the cinders of all bourgeois culture.

Perhaps as a consequence of the difficulties in the way of understanding the mediations between these historical events and artistic practices, we might have to propose a third context, a more narrowly focused, more dehistoricized one, to discuss the work by both artists originating in that moment. We just might have to assume, if not to accept, as has become customary again, that artistic beginnings are ultimately independent of the historical calamities that surround them, and occur solely in the mysterious discursive isolation of painterly and sculptural practices. This third proposed context would then require first of all the posing of the question of whether and how Hantaï and Villeglé relate to or formulate a shared episteme of painting in postwar France; what the parameters, the historical structures, and the formal morphologies of this shared episteme might be; and how we could identify and describe them.

The first layer of such a shared episteme could be called Henri Matisse, since both artists evidently responded to the postwar presence of the artist of the *papiers découpés* of *Oceania* in 1946 and of *Jazz* in 1947. Therefore we would have to retrace their complex movements attempting both to position and differentiate themselves within that legacy: Hantaï's chromatic schemes for one, becoming most evident in the work of the early 1960s—in the luminosity of cerulean blues or in the chthonic memories of sienna and umber tones and other metaphorical tints—seem to insist on the continuing validity of Matisse's latent assumption that painterly chroma can never escape its condition of grounding vision in nature, and thus its referential relationship. And Villeglé's radical substitution of colored papers for pigment might suggest such a comparative approach in the reading of even his early *décollage* work from 1949 onward as at least partially a response to the hedonistic seduction of Matisse's *papiers découpés*, since it is in fact unlikely that the legacy of a German from Hannover was accessible in the Paris of 1949.³

2. Ernst Bloch's foundational work of a neo-Marxist eschatology emerging from the experience of devastation and exile was typically written in the period from 1947 to 1953 and first published in 1959.

3. Kurt Schwitters's work was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1948 in his first posthumous memorial exhibition. The first postwar exhibition of work by Schwitters in Paris was organized in 1952 by the gallery of Heinz Berggruen. It is unlikely that Villeglé would have had any prior knowledge of Schwitters's work.

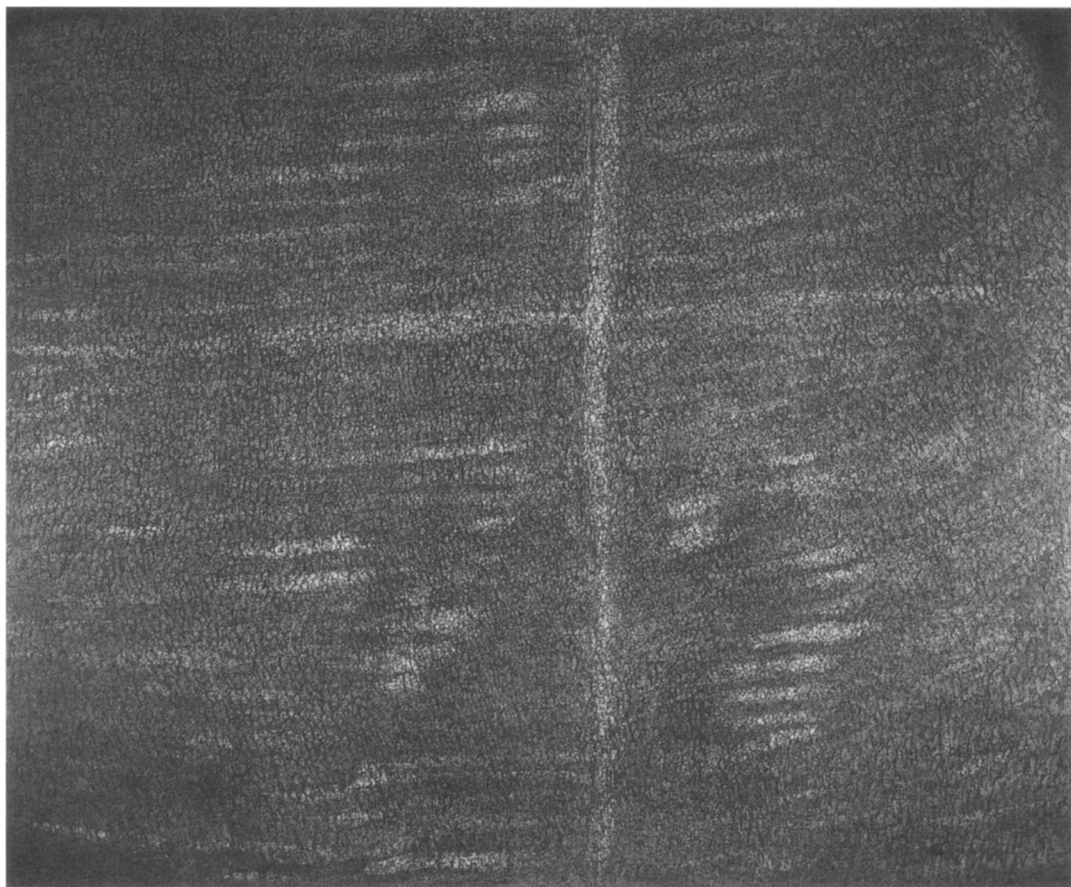
Aside from the issue of color, however, Matisse's redefinition of the morphology of drawing and painterly design could have been another attraction for Hantai and Villeglé in a postwar recovery of the *découpages*, works which were in many ways more radical than any other aspect of Matisse's production of the 1930s had allowed one to anticipate.⁴ Thus both artists attempted to conceive of a new type of painting of pure—almost self-generated—design outside of an author's intentional composition; to allow for a random constellation of chroma and aleatory, yet serialized form, in order to transcend both the limitations of a Constructivist techno-scientific abstraction and those of the biomorphic and automatist design of the Surrealists of the 1920s.

It seems, then, that Hantai and Villeglé responded first of all to the overbearing presence of Matisse's attempt to renaturalize the gesture of drawing. As they conceived new dialectical principles of pictorial mark-making (the procedures of *pliage* and of *décollage*), they could claim to have suspended, if not sublated—for the moment at least—all of the contradictions between the artisanal and the mechanical, between intentional choice and aleatory chance.

The second layer of the painterly episteme that both Hantai and Villeglé share is the condition of being situated between two types of representational prohibition, the first one having been initially pronounced by the modernist ethos and the second one being constituted at this time by the thresholds of representability that recent history had established for artists and writers alike. Thus the question has to be asked whether the European artists of the moment of 1948 faced a historical horizon of specifically European postwar limits and prohibitions that was fundamentally different from that of their American peers. Clearly it must have been impossible to judge whether the pursuit of painting after Auschwitz was now any less barbaric than the pursuit of lyrical poetry, as Adorno would notoriously argue in 1954. Historical concerns of this order do not appear to have affected the work of the Americans in Paris at that time, such as Sam Francis or Ellsworth Kelly. But if we contemplate Hantai's monumental *Á Galla Placidia*, we can be less easily convinced that painting had indeed forfeited all attempts to respond to recent historical experiences.

The explicit reference to Byzantine architecture and its mosaics records Hantai's visit to Ravenna in 1948 when, escaping from Hungary, he was traversing

4. Hantai and Villeglé would by no means remain alone in recognizing the seduction of the extreme elegance of an almost neoclassical conception of drawing and color resulting from the seemingly radical procedure and morphology of cut chromatic paper. Ellsworth Kelly, for example, one of their generational American counterparts in the postwar reception of Matisse, would of course introduce exactly the same responses to Matisse. For an excellent and detailed account of the number and frequency of American artists arriving in Paris at that time, see Nathalie Brunet, "Chronologie 1943–1954," in Yve-Alain Bois et al., *Ellsworth Kelly: Les années françaises 1948–1954* (Paris: Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1992), pp. 177–94.



Simon Hantaï. Á Galla Placidia. 1958-59.

Italy on his way to France.⁵ A muted yet almost luminous figure structured in an overarching cruciform maps the vertical and horizontal axes of the huge canvas in its entirety and is juxtaposed with a ground consisting of myriads of molecular, scraped, and fragmented structures of pigment that seem to have grown upon the canvas on their own, like incrustations. This painting's opposition between

5. Paradoxically, once again, Hantaï and Kelly seem to have shared exactly the same interests at that time, since Kelly copied extensively from the Byzantine manuscripts he studied in Paris. Yet it would seem fair to argue that he was primarily attracted to their model character as a representational system that operated prior to the establishment of the universal rule of Renaissance perspective, and that he was not concerned with the question, as was Hantaï, of what the relation between the sacred and painting could be after the experience of the Second World War.

monumentality and molecularity reads like an ode to the miracle of survival itself: not just because it seems to be emerging from the contemplation of how monuments themselves had survived the destruction of culture, but perhaps more importantly because it poses the question of whether and how the experience of the sacred and painting's relationship to it could still be imagined after the Holocaust and the destruction of European culture. Most difficult of all, the painting seems to elaborate upon the doubt of whether any new painting could be begun that would lay claim to that heritage under conditions of the most tragic devastation of the experience of the sacred and the collective.

Furthermore, the consideration at that moment of public sacral architecture originated in the question of what subjects—if any—could form a new audience to receive the epiphanies of painting after the war, and in what kind of public spaces they would be disseminated. What kind of legibility should painting have under these circumstances, or rather, what kind of opacity and inaccessibility should it have, in order to defend itself against any and all claims for the reconstruction of a bourgeois humanist, if not religious, model of cultural experience that were being made at that moment? And lastly, painting would have critically reflected the claims for a continuity of aesthetic categories, genres, and procedures of production made by work such as Matisse's at that time, if by no other means than by the fact that Matisse reestablished painting as an artisanal articulation of a deeper sense of the bodily inscription of vision and cognition within the parameters of an established pictorial language and its conventions.

And yet—and here a third shared condition arises—it became evident to Hantaï and Villeglé that oppositional painting could no longer be patterned on the rebellious recourse to the graffiti mark or the palimpsest that had served Jean Dubuffet so well as the countermodel with which he opposed the classical legacies of the masters of French modernism. Any continuing identification of the artist and the mentally deranged as staged in Dubuffet's preoccupation with the artists of *art brut* would have become equally unconvincing at the beginning of the 1950s.

Simultaneously, it seems to have become equally apparent to Hantaï that the carnal register with which painting had been associated in the work of Jean Fautrier would not be accessible to him either, given that the inscription of painting within the traumatic dimension was being rapidly surpassed by the emerging evidence of a culture of administrative rationality within which painting would have to situate itself in the future (in that sense, Hantaï found himself perhaps in a dilemma parallel to the one encountered by the writers of the *nouveau roman*, who at that very moment sensed an equal urgency to distance themselves from the narratives of the sacred, the bodily, the wound, and the trauma that had preoccupied the immediate postwar culture, and who were now turning their attention to the rise of the empire of total disaffection and total control of everyday life that the institution of postwar consumer culture would bring about).

Therefore we could argue that the fourth layer of such a shared painterly episteme could perhaps be called "the acceleration of automatism under the

auspices of spectacle culture, or the reception of Jackson Pollock.” In the Paris of the early to mid-1940s, on the opposite end of the spectrum offered by Matisse, Fautrier, and Dubuffet, Francis Picabia for one had already submerged drawing and painterly design within the vulgarity of the mass-cultural, photographic matrix. And now, in the late '40s, the subjection of painting and drawing to various mechanomorphic disfigurements had led to the final erosion of these artisanally based practices of skillfully recording psychically privileged forms of experience. In the increasingly mechanized morphology of late Surrealist automatism, these traditional forms and functions of drawing and painterly design were being dissolved and spatially dispersed. This inexorable disfiguration of painting was most often declared to be the result of a turn to non-Western sources, primarily Asian principles of calligraphic inscription; but the actual historicity of these tendencies would become most striking when Pollock sent his first and strongest signals of painting's shifting registers to France.⁶

What we would witness at that moment, then, is the formation of a peculiar epistemic couplet in painting, one in which the incessant subjection of painting to the needs and demands of spectacle would be bound up with painting's incessant reassertion of its origins in ritualistic and spiritualist experience. It seems to have been necessary to relocate the origins of that renewed spirituality in a dual transfer: outside of the purviews of European Christianity (deeply compromised after the Second World War); and outside of the purviews of traditional European modernist abstraction (discredited in both its biomorphic and geometric versions).

Georges Mathieu would become the first to inhabit and fully articulate this epistemic schism, as well as to read Pollock's messages in Paris.⁷ He would record accelerated automatism as a signal for the painting of the future, since painting as a practice could no longer remain within the protected spaces of traditional perceptual and artisanal order. Against its own principles and histories, painting—like all other constructs and conventions of cognition and perception—would inevitably have to be transfigured by the increasing impact of spectacle culture. Mathieu would also be among the first—along with André Breton—not only to recognize the importance of Hantai's work, but to see it explicitly in the dual terms of a newly accelerated automatism and as a painting claiming the forms of Western mysticism as its origins:

6. This became evident, for example, in the work of an American artist such as Sam Francis, who had also just arrived in Paris in 1949.

7. Mathieu claims to have prepared the first Parisian exhibition of works by Pollock in 1948, writing: “In 1948, at a time when nobody in Paris would have dreamt of presenting such a confrontation, I had the project for an exhibition in which French and American painters of a similar affinity would be united; this exhibition was to include: Bryen, de Kooning, Hartung, Gorky, Mathieu, Picabia, Pollock, Reinhardt, Rothko, Russell, Sauer and Wols. . . .” It is highly unlikely, however, that any works by Pollock were actually on exhibit since Mathieu recalls that “unfortunately this exhibition could not be realized in its entirety as planned due to the difficulties in getting works from the American galleries.” See Georges Mathieu, *Au-delà du Tachisme* (Paris: René Julliard, 1963), p. 174.

The arrival of speed in the aesthetics of the West does not require an apprenticeship with mimicking the Asian. The occident does not need to learn anything from the orient in order to express itself. It can eventually coincide with the former. Hantai's point of departure is very different. Taking off from an outlived Surrealism, he would demand from Breton to abandon his ossified positions and it is he who would be the origin of the overture toward "tachism." His development would be as rapid as it would be organic. He would very swiftly understand the advantages of using a language of immediacy which he would charge with an entirely Western form of mysticism.⁸

In the hagiographic reception of Pollock in France—as embodied in the work of Mathieu—it would soon become evident to what extent the random expansion of Pollock's radical principles of a newfound painterly performativity would be blindly subjected to the process of spectacularization. The very bodily spaces and carnal structures to which Pollock's painting had recourse in order to mobilize the somatic inscription in defense against the permeation of gesture by spectacle, and in order to oppose the instrumentalization of the gestural itself (programmatically reenacted as of the mid-1950s in the work of Cy Twombly), would now—in the hands of Mathieu and later in those of Yves Klein—become the mere advertisement for their own specularly (perhaps this was what Clement Greenberg had seen as the danger, celebrated by Harold Rosenberg, of painting's becoming "apocalyptic wallpaper").

Every painter at that moment, Parisian or American, seems to have searched for the proper register in which to anchor the determining conditions of a total dispersal of a centered Cartesian subjectivity and the discrediting of conscious individual control. What was at stake was the discovery of painterly procedures within which the multiple and incessant fracturing of a heretofore seemingly intact practice of drawing and painterly design could be articulated. Painting now had to find principles through which it could publicly refute the last residues of a visual hedonism which seduced its viewers either by the virtuosity of its graphic, gestural, or chromatic execution or by an enigmatic iconography that pretended to lead to the deepest recesses of the mythical and prelinguistic unconscious.

This implied first of all a search for the matrices in which painting could acknowledge its relegation to utter iterability. In the recourse to this type of matrix, painting could publicly abdicate all past claims to the heroism of a deeper singularity, to forms of experience more profound than those of the lowest of its common spectators. The matrix provided a mode in which painting could accept the sense of its newly internalized immolation, either by exchanging the structure of what had been its defining singularity (its uniqueness, its self-enclosure) for

8. Mathieu, "Triomphe de l'Abstraction Lyrique" in *Au-delà du Tachisme*, pp. 105–6, n. 78.

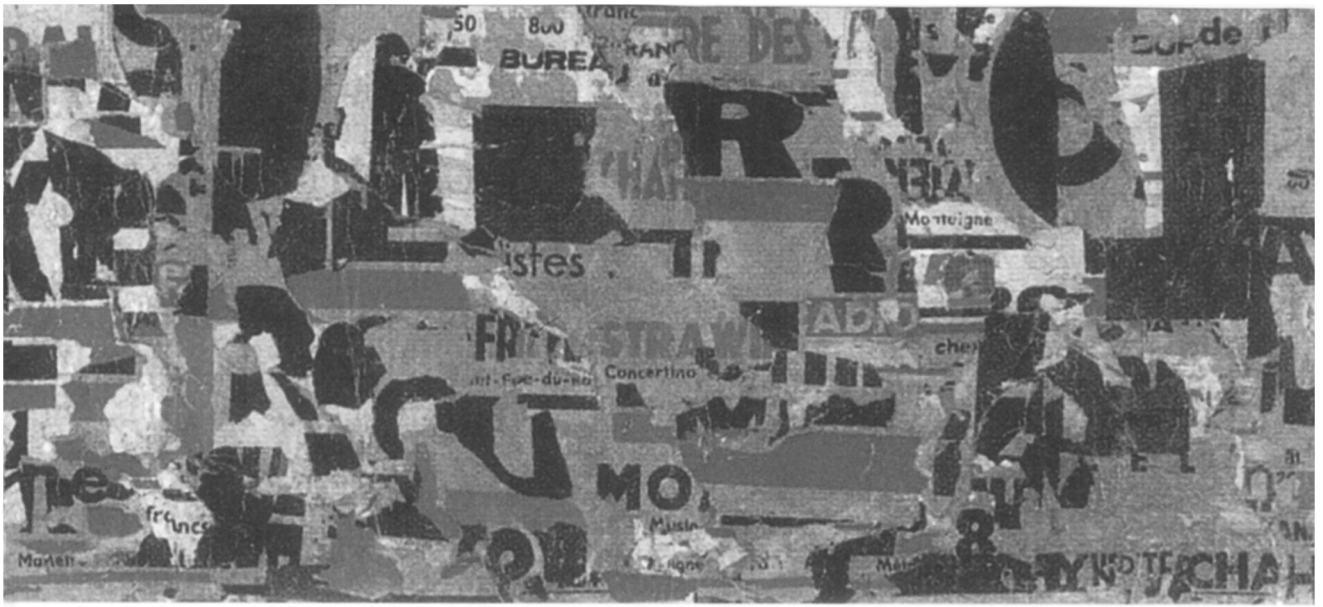


that of a “mere” event (cf. Allan Kaprow’s “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” in 1958), or for that of a “mere” template (this is the step taken by Jasper Johns in 1954). In establishing these very principles at the beginning of the 1950s, Hantaï and Villeglé would thus have certainly responded critically to both the legacy of Matisse and that of Surrealist painting (which is evident in Hantaï’s protracted labor of detaching himself from the entanglement with late Surrealist iconographies), even if they had not already been explicitly responding in their own ways to the “legacy of Jackson Pollock” as well.

Perhaps this could then be understood as yet another dialectical nexus between Hantaï and Villeglé: both artists were contemplating the erosion of painting as it was taking place under their own eyes, and both artists were pursuing similar questions from opposite perspectives. They recognized, that is, that the esoteric condition of *peinture* as an art of privileged experience was increasingly being displaced by the new register of the spectacular. From now on, all gestures and all representations would find themselves inextricably intertwined with the instrumentality of advertising and the publicity of product propaganda.

That even painting would now have to face the inexorable necessity of adapting itself to a universal condition of desublimatory iterability is the insight that would be pronounced by Villeglé and Raymond Hains already in their magisterial opening statement of *Ach Alma Manétro* in 1949. In this, his first *décollage* work, Villeglé arrested and contained the graphic virtuosity of biomorphic drawing and the automatist dimensions of Surrealist painting within the rigid shells of a pre-produced typographic matrix of found advertising formats. At the same time he relocated the historical verdict on the necessary demotion of painterly skills by transferring it to the event structure of clandestine vandalism.

Villeglé’s pictorialization of language in a random plenitude of chromatic dissolutions finds its historical counterpart in Hantaï’s repositioning of painterly chroma within the rigorous registers of graphic performativity. Thus one could argue that Hantaï’s performance of the *pliage* (the rendering of the painterly



process semimechanical through the operation of dyeing and folding the canvas in an almost technical manner) has the *décollagists'* collection of found vandalizing gestures as its procedural counterpart. This principle extended the rationalizing and quantifying order of the pictorial grid—which had heretofore merely mapped the painting's surface—ever deeper into painting's material support structure; and it fragmented even the procedural temporality of painting itself into quantifiable units.

Yet, paradoxically, Hantaï never quite ceased to maintain or reclaim at least a residual access to the natural referent in the pictorial which gave his matrix—oscillating between the structure of foliage or crystalline morphologies—a certain conventional quality. Johns's painting, by comparison, committed itself (in the way that one is "committed" to an institution) to the tautological rigor of mapping the canvas by means of the numerical or alphabetical matrix, thereby hermetically enacting the order of total administration in which any hope for the renaturalization of gesture, chroma, or composition had been lost altogether.

Clearly then, the construction of a historical context for artists as different as Hantaï and Villeglé poses a number of productive problems, in which the necessity of an altogether different approach to painting in the postwar period becomes evident. First of all, it has become clear that any attempt to establish chronologies of influence—whatever connections one might want to construct—will be profoundly deficient, just as the artists themselves have consistently already told us. Not a single connection can be verified between *Ach Alma Manétro*, for example, and either the legacy of European Dadaism (in particular Kurt Schwitters) or the American postwar example opened by the newly emerging large-scale canvases of the New York School and their morphology of the torn and shredded surfaces (e.g., Clyfford Still) or the vast fields of crisscrossing graffiti-like inscriptions in the work of Jackson Pollock.

This would leave us, then, with two methodological options for answering the question of how such enormously important work as Hantaï's *Galla Placidia*



François Dufrêne.
Les Barricades. 1968.

and Villeglé's *Ach Alma Manétero* could have emerged out of the Parisian context of 1949. The first would be the one that the formalists have already given us for some time: that the languages of painting, like all other *langues*, operate in relative independence from the historical contexts within which they find themselves, but that—working through comparison and in contradistinction to the paradigmatic changes that occur within the *langues* of painting at any given moment—they are in a perpetual state of change and adjustment within themselves. Having the tremendous advantage of clarifying why and how certain chronological inconsistencies can occur, this argument would then easily defy any attempt to construct causal connections such as “influence” and “interdependence” over time and across vast geopolitical spaces (as in the Pollock question or the Dada reception question).

The second option would be the one I have attempted to sketch out in the above discussion. It turns on recognizing the profound asynchronicity in the writing of postwar art history (e.g., the difficulty of speaking of the formation of “movements” in the postwar period, when with *Ach Alma Manétero*, the beginning of *nouveau réalisme* would have to be relocated to 1949). Or, given *Galla Placidia*, recognizing an independent model of a very specific European response to the

crisis of easel painting after the Second World War, a model that cannot be addressed with the formalist analysis of post-Greenbergian approaches any more successfully than with the limited tools of a social art history exclusively based on a mechanistic principle of ideology critique. But it is a methodology that would yet have to be elaborated, of which I hope to have given in the above not any more than a crude sketch and in which the structure of the historical experience and the structure of aesthetic production could be recognized within sets of complex analogies that are neither mechanistically determined nor conceived of as arbitrarily autonomous, but that require the specificity of understanding the multiple mediations taking place within each artistic proposition and its historical context.